
THOMAS
HART
BENTON

MURALS

Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center
November 16, 1989–January 31, 1990

THOMAS HART BENTON: MURALS

The New York showing of *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original* is being presented in two sections. The mural cycles—*The American Historical Epic* and *The Arts of Life in America*—are exhibited in the south gallery of the Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center. All other works are on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art on Madison Avenue at 75th Street (November 17, 1989–February 11, 1990). In addition to these two mural cycles, we are fortunate to be able to exhibit studies for the mural *America Today*, in the collection of The Equitable; the mural itself is on permanent display in the north corridor of the Equitable Center.

Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original was organized by The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, and made possible by generous grants from the United Missouri Bank of Kansas City, N.A., and the Enid and Crosby Kemper Foundation. Additional funding has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Missouri Arts Council. The exhibition is sponsored at the Whitney Museum by The Equitable.

AMERICA TODAY

America Today, commissioned by the New School for Social Research, New York, in 1930, presents a panoramic view of the nation Benton encountered on his summer sketching trips through back roads and small towns during the 1920s. Purchased by The Equitable in 1984 and completely restored before its installation, the mural originally adorned the boardroom walls of the New School, where it established Benton's reputation as the country's foremost Regionalist painter. The project sparked a renewed interest in mural painting and helped precipitate the wide-ranging mural program of the WPA during the 1930s.

America Today's ten panels present Benton's interpretation of the nation's economic and social life during a period of dramatic industrial growth. The first and last panels, entitled *City Activities with Dance Hall* and *City Activities with Subway*, depict the raucous aspects of urban pastimes during the Roaring Twenties. The second, third, and fourth panels from the left—*City Building*, *Steel*, and *Coal*—commemorate the country's workers and its major industries. *Instruments of Power*, the mural's central and largest panel, is an optimistic vision of technological progress in transportation and energy production, while *Changing West*, *Midwest*, and *Deep South*, to the right of center, focus on the industrialization of these three regions. *Out-reaching Hands*, which hangs opposite the other panels, was originally located above the boardroom doorway at the New School. With its cropped view of a poorhouse and breadline, this is the only panel that suggests the effects of the Depression. It was the last to be painted, probably in 1931 or 1932, when the Depression was nearing its worst. Just as the first nine panels provide a panoramic view of the nation during one of its carefree periods, the final segment represents the bleak reality of one of America's darkest eras.

The American Historical Epic and *The Arts of Life in America* murals are itemized in the accompanying brochure. The panels of *America Today* and their related drawings and oil studies, all in the collection of The Equitable, are described here. Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.

PRELIMINARY WORKS FOR *AMERICA TODAY*

Throughout the 1920s, Benton made sketches on his travels; some of these were later used for *America Today*. After receiving the commission in 1930, he made additional studies for individual panels.

Black Man, c. 1920–30
Pencil on paper
12 × 8½

Factory, c. 1929
Pencil on paper
8 × 5

Boxer, c. 1920–30
Ink and sepia wash on paper
18 × 13⅝

Workers Tapping the Blast Furnace,
c. 1929
Pencil and ink on paper
10 × 8

Clown, c. 1920–30
Pencil on paper
3½ × 8

City Building, 1930
Tempera on board
15 × 20

Logging Scene, c. 1920–30
Pencil, ink, and sepia wash on paper
12 × 8¾

Rejected study for *Steel*, 1930
Pencil on paper
11¾ × 8¾

The Preacher, c. 1920–30
Pencil on paper
14½ × 10⅝

Study for *City Activities with
Dance Hall*, 1930
Oil on masonite
14½ × 23

Stockbroker, c. 1920–30
Pencil on paper
11⅝ × 8¼

Study for *City Activities with
Subway*, 1930
Oil on masonite
15 × 21½

Woman Dancing, c. 1920–30
Pencil on paper
14½ × 10⅝

Study for *Deep South*, 1930
Pencil on paper
10 × 12½

Logging Scene, c. 1928
Pencil, ink, and sepia wash on paper
8¾ × 11

Study for *Instruments of Power*,
1930
Oil on masonite
14 × 18

Alvin Johnson, 1929
Pencil on paper
14½ × 10⅝

Max Eastman, c. 1930
Pencil on paper
17¾ × 13

Peggy Reynolds, 1929
Pencil on paper
8¾ × 5⅝

Hands, c. 1930–31
Pencil on paper
14½ × 10½

Woman, 1929
Pencil on paper
8 × 5

Hands, Cup, Pot, c. 1930–31
Pencil on paper
14½ × 10½



City Activities with Dance Hall, 1930–3
Distemper and egg tempera
on gessoed linen with oil glaze
92 × 134½



City Building, 1930–32
Distemper and egg tempera
on gessoed linen with oil glaze
92 × 117



Steel, 1930–32
Distemper and egg tempera
on gessoed linen with oil glaze
92 × 117



Coal, 1930–32
Distemper and egg tempera
on gessoed linen with oil glaze
92 × 117



Instruments of Power, 1930–32
Distemper and egg tempera
on gessoed linen with oil glaze
92 × 160

Changing West, 1930–32
Distemper and egg tempera
on gessoed linen with oil glaze
92 × 117



Midwest, 1930–32
Distemper and egg tempera
on gessoed linen with oil glaze
92 × 117



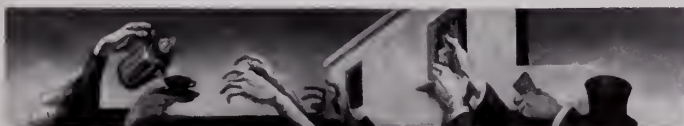
Deep South, 1930–32
Distemper and egg tempera
on gessoed linen with oil glaze
92 × 117



ty Activities with Subway, 1930–32
Distemper and egg tempera
on gessoed linen with oil glaze
92 × 134½



Outreaching Hands, 1930–32
Distemper and egg tempera
on gessoed linen with oil glaze
17½ × 97



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